

# CITY OF GLOUCESTER Conservation Commission Guide to Home Landscaping



## **Introduction**

There are many ways a homeowner can influence the environment simply through the landscaping done in their own backyard. Planting fruit-bearing bushes provides food for birds while planting tall grass and creating brush piles invites wildlife habitat. Trees help reduce water runoff and provide shade that keeps homes cooler in the summer.

In contrast, homeowners can inadvertently harm the environment by using chemical herbicides or pesticides, grading their yards which in turn can create flooding problems, mowing wetlands or accidentally filling wetland areas with yard waste.

This brochure was created to help homeowners improve and conserve the environment through good landscaping practices. The following provides an overview of common landscaping issues and offers some solutions. More detailed information can be obtained from any of the websites listed below.

## **Water: Grading and Runoff**

Creating terraces, filling low areas, leveling a yard for recreational use and building retaining walls all change grades which in turn change the flow of water and runoff on your property. Resist the urge to fill that low, wet area on your property. This pocket acts like a sponge to absorb rainwater and prevent flooding in a way dry soil cannot. Filling such an area can create changes in hydrology on your property or your neighbor's which is a violation of State and Local Regulations. Retaining walls can also have negative effects. One must consider the hydrology of the site before creating a retaining wall.

Reconsider converting vegetated areas to impervious surfaces. Hard surfaces such as pavement and brick do not absorb rain and runoff which can lead to erosion.

Consider using peastone, wood chips, stepping stones or bricks on sand (without mortar) in your landscape. Remember that maintaining healthy plant cover in your yard also helps to absorb water. Using planting beds can help reduce the amount of lawn you mow and also keeps areas pervious to water; less lawn equals less maintenance and watering.

Keep in mind that projects such as filling, grading, constructing retaining walls or converting lawn to impervious surface within 100' of a wetland, 200' of a river or perennial stream or 300' of ACEC (Area of Critical Environmental Concern) require a filing with the Conservation Commission. [One exception is converting existing lawn or impervious areas to vegetated areas or gardens.]

## **Landscape Without Chemicals**

Chemical herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers used on lawns or gardens can seep into wetland areas and contaminate wetlands, wells and public drinking water supplies. These chemicals hurt fish, other aquatic animals, pets and humans. Fortunately, there are alternatives to using chemicals in your yard.



To avoid using pesticides, plant a variety of species to avoid widespread damage by a single pest. Keep in mind that the majority of insects are harmless or even beneficial. When chemical pesticides are used, both the "bad" and the "good" will be killed. Instead of chemical fertilizers, the best defense is to keep soil and plants healthy by using compost and mulch.

Using species native to your area improves the likelihood of stronger, better established plants. Monitor your landscape to catch problems early. Pests and disease can be controlled by hand-picking, trapping or pruning.

Many homeowners spend a great deal of time and money applying chemicals to keep their lawns green and weed-free. Reduce your lawn size by creating planting beds with wildflowers, a variety of herbs or other low maintenance, native species and you can help eliminate this problem.



## **Landscape Maintenance**

All homeowners at one time or another have a need to prune tree branches or cut back shrubs. Next time you are performing such maintenance work think about how your landscaping affects the environment.

Dead trees provide habitats for birds, such as woodpeckers, and other animals. They should not be removed unless they pose a safety hazard. Logs, piles of leaves or brush piles you create can provide animals with a place to sleep, hide or rear young. Brush piles are likely to be most effective when placed close to or within hedgerows, woodland edges, field corners, brushy areas or food sources such as wild berry bushes.

Any yard waste such as grass clippings, weeds or branches should not be placed in streams, marshes or other wetland areas. Instead they may be used in compost piles you can create in order to enrich the soil in your garden.



### **Appropriate Plantings**

It is both practical and beneficial to plant shrubs, flowers, trees, etc. that are native to your area. These plants will be more likely to survive and wildlife will take advantage of these familiar plantings. In addition, you will be avoiding so-called invasive species which can take over your yard and even your neighbor's.

Here is a very short list of possible trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants for the area. Consult one of the websites on the back of this brochure or a local garden center for more details and planting suggestions.

**Trees:** Red maple, Atlantic white cedar, Swamp white oak, eastern arborvitae

**Herbaceous plants:** Swamp milkweed, Lady fern, Blazing star, Cardinal flower

**Shrubs:** Buttonbush, Silky dogwood, Creeping juniper, Spicebush, Swamp azalea, American elder, Northern bayberry

**Common invasive species include:** phragmites, purple loose strife, rosa rugosa, oriental bittersweet, cat briar, honeysuckle, etc.

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